

LIVING ON \$500 A YEAR

Student Reading

In order to understand the long road ahead of less developed countries, we must make a radical adjustment of our picture of the world. It is not easy to make this mental jump. But let us attempt it by imagining how a typical American family, living in a small suburban house with an income of \$44,970 (the U.S. per capita GNI), could be transformed into an equally typical family of the less developed world. We will use Sub-Saharan Africa as a model, where the majority of the countries have a per capita GNI under \$500. (Note: GNI refers to the gross national income, which is a way of measuring the economic value of a country's goods and services. Per capita means that the figure shows a relative measure of the population's wealth; i.e. each person's "share.")

We begin by shutting off the electricity and removing everything that uses it – lamps, appliances, radio, and television.

Next we shut off the heat and air conditioning.

We take out the beds, chairs, rugs, and curtains. We are left with only a few old blankets, a kitchen table, and a wooden chair. Along with the dressers go the clothes. Each family member may keep in his "wardrobe" his oldest suit or dress and a shirt or blouse. We will permit a pair of shoes to the man of the family, but none for the wife or children.

Next we shut off running water. If the family is lucky, there will be a latrine and pump down the road to share with the community.

We move to the kitchen. The appliances have already been taken out, so we turn to the cupboards. A box of matches, a small bag of flour, and some sugar and salt may stay. A few moldy potatoes, already in the garbage can, must be rescued, for they will provide much of tonight's meal. We will leave a handful of onions and a dish of dried beans. All the rest we take away, the fresh vegetables, the canned goods, the meat, and the milk.

Now that the house is stripped, we take it away too. The family moves to the tool shed. It is crowded, but at least they have shelter. Although the family is in a smaller space, their numbers have increased. Instead of being an average North American two-child family, they now have five children (the average in most of Africa). All other houses in the neighborhood have also been replaced with small structures, jammed together, full of people.

Communication must go next. No more newspapers, magazines, or books – not that they are missed since we must also take away the family's literacy. Instead, we will allow one radio in the shantytown.

Next, government services must go. No more postal carrier, no more fire fighters. There is a school, but it is three miles away and consists of two classrooms. They are not overcrowded since only half the children in the neighborhood, mainly boys, go to school.

There are no hospitals or doctors nearby. The nearest clinic is ten miles away and is tended by a midwife. It can be reached by bicycle, provided that the family has a bicycle, which is unlikely. Or one can go by bus – there is usually room on top, if not inside.

Finally, money. We will allow our family a cash hoard of \$10. Meanwhile, they must earn their keep. Since the children are not likely to be in school long, most of them will work beside their parents all day. As peasant cultivators with three acres to tend, they may raise the equivalent of \$200 to \$500 worth of crops a year. If they are tenant farmers, which is more than likely, a third or so of the crop will go to the landlord and probably another 10 percent to the local money-lender.

But there will be enough to eat, or almost. The average human body needs a daily input of at least 2,000 calories just to replenish the energy consumed by its living cells, and people in Sub-Saharan Africa average just 2,095 calories. Like any insufficiently fueled machinery, their bodies run down sooner; the life expectancy in Sub-Saharan Africa is 49 years old.

This is life as lived by hundreds of millions of people. Of course it is just an impression – it is missing the many strong smells and sounds of streets overflowing with humanity. It is also missing the sense of familiarity these people have with their situation; what may seem shocking to us is softened for those who have never known anything else. But the impression provides the general idea of life in less developed countries, adding a picture of reality to the statistics by which underdevelopment is ordinarily measured. When we are told that half the world's population enjoys a standard of living on "less than \$500 a year," this is what that figure means.

*Updated and adapted by permission from Harper and Row Publishers, Inc. The original passage appears in *The Great Ascent*, by Robert Heilbroner (Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1963) pp. 33-37*

Situation Card: Your Class

Your class has decided that as a senior project, you will all work together to make others aware of the extreme poverty in many parts of the world and take some sort of action to help the poor in other countries. At first this task seems overwhelming, so your group has been elected to come up with a class plan. Using the worksheet as a guide, discuss ways a small group of students can raise awareness and take action to combat this problem. Be as creative as you can and don't forget to help students make the connection between their own behavior and what happens overseas. Remember that the more low-cost and free activities that you can think of, the more you will be able to do.

Situation Card: Village Leaders

Your group is made up of the respected leaders of a small, impoverished African village. Life has been very hard for your village in the last few years, and your group has been chosen by the community to try and alleviate some of the poverty and improve the situation. If you come up with a plan to improve life for the people in your village, you can expect to receive a very small amount of money (about \$500) from the local government and an international relief organization. Only one member of your group is literate, so please select that person to write down all of your ideas. Please use the worksheet and your first-hand knowledge of the local situation to formulate a plan to improve the lives of the people in the village. Remember, you won't be able to do everything, so focus on those things that will make the most difference.

Situation Card: USAID Country Team

Your group works for the U.S. government in the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in a South Asian country where the majority of the people live in conditions like those described in the article. Your mission is to work with the government and people of that country to make the lives of the people better, but you only have a limited budget, and Congress may cut your resources once again. Using the worksheet to get started, determine the best way to accomplish your mission given your limited resources. What are the greatest needs? What do you concentrate on first? What is the most efficient way to help those people who are the most in need? Remember, you won't be able to do everything – decide as a group on what is most important.

Situation Card: Local Community Group

You are members of a small community group in North America, and you have become concerned about the extreme poverty in many parts of the world and would like to organize and take action to help others in your community understand the problem. You also want to help the needy in some of the world's poorest countries. At first this task seems overwhelming, so your group has decided to write an action plan. Using the worksheet as a guide, discuss ways a small group of citizens can raise awareness and can take action to combat this problem. Be as creative as you can and don't forget to help others make the connection between their own behavior and what happens overseas. Remember that the more low-cost and free activities that you can think of, the more you will be able to do, as your budget is extremely limited.

Situation Card: Special Working Group of the United Nations

The Secretary General of the United Nations has declared that eliminating poverty is the most important goal of the U.N. Your group is a special team brought together to decide the best way to improve the lives of the world's poorest and to close the gap between rich and poor countries. Since this is such a large project, the secretary has asked you to identify the top four problems contributing to the problem of poverty and the inequity between nations and to suggest ways of solving those problems. Using the worksheet as a starting point, identify the four most serious problems and come up with a plan for addressing one of these problems. Remember, you can think big, but ultimately your plan should make a real difference in people's lives.

Situation Card: Government Advisors in a Developing Country

You are advisors to the newly-elected prime minister in an impoverished developing nation. Your party campaigned on the promise of eliminating poverty and improving the lives of the people. Now that you have been elected, the prime minister has asked your group to come up with an action plan to relieve the worst of the problems in your country. You are committed to helping your people and eager to get started, but your budget is extremely limited and probably won't increase much in the next few years. Using the worksheet as a guide, determine the best way to accomplish your mission given your limited resources. What are the greatest needs? What do you concentrate on first? What is the most efficient way to help those people who are the most in need? Remember, you won't be able to do everything – decide as a group on what is most important and then go from there.

Living on \$500 a Year Student Worksheet What Can We Do?

Group Situation:

Names of People in the Group:

Note: This worksheet is a tool to get you started. Feel free to record your group's goals, ideas, and action plan on other pieces of paper as needed.

Based on the scenario outlined in your situation card, identify the most important and pressing problems facing your group and write goals or priority statements for your group to work towards accomplishing.

Examples of Goals and Priority Statements:

Raise \$500 dollars for housing construction in an African village.

Secure adequate nutrition for every person in our country.

Ensure clean drinking water for everyone in our town.

Expand health services to all the poor families in the country.

Guarantee every child in the world completes school through grade six.

After you have written down four or five goals, pick one goal that your group will work on first.

What are some simple short-term things that could be done to help you meet your goal?

What are some long-term things that could be done to help you meet your goal?

Using the back of this sheet or another sheet of paper, create an action plan and with a timeline for reaching your goal.